Design Thinking for the social sector

Organizations operating in the social sector have been aspiring to make bigger impacts on the beneficiaries and communities they serve. And they've become much more open to innovative ideas and approaches used by the commercial sector.

One key aspect of innovation is identification of a challenge or problem area in order to pinpoint the correct solution. And one approach that businesses have been increasingly using for problem identification and solution is design thinking. Design thinking is a simple, logical, design-based approach to problem-solving that focuses on people and their emotional responses. It helps identify what matters to people both inside and outside of the organization.

Because of its successes in the corporate world, a growing number of organizations in the social sector are exploring how design thinking can help them prosper on behalf of their end beneficiaries.

Design thinking encompasses processes including context analysis, problem finding and framing, ideation and solution generating, creative thinking, sketching and drawing, modeling and prototyping, and testing and evaluating.

Its core features include the ability to:

- Resolve ill-defined problems
- Adopt solution-focused strategies
- Use logic and reasoning
- Employ nonverbal or graphic modeling media.[1]

1. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design_thinking#Problem_framing

In design thinking, several different tools are used to gather and analyze information. These tools encourage participation, make it easier for people to express their views, and help organize information in a way that makes it more useful and more accessible to the group that is trying to analyze a given situation.

Some of the most commonly used tools in design thinking are rose, bud, thorns (RBT), abstract laddering, fly-on-the-wall observation, creative metrics, impact/difficulty metrics, and concept posters.

The following is a design thinking case study about how a team of Genpact Social Impact Fellows helped a not-for-profit organization in India better serve its end beneficiaries.

The Genpact Social Impact Fellowship (GSIF) program is professional services firm Genpact's flagship social transformation program in India. Established five years ago in partnership with the EdelGive Foundation, the GSIF uses a rigorous application process to select a small group of the company's 95,000+ employees to help not-for-profits reengineer and reimagine their processes through a yearlong fellowship.

Program fellows have worked on social projects in the fields of education, skills development, women's empowerment, and employability. All of the GSIF projects have incorporated design thinking in some capacity, with various partners including Milaan Foundation, the Kaivalya Education Foundation, Saajha, Medha, Teach for India, and ETASHA Society.

Design thinking in action: a real-world social sector case study

The background

A well-known not-for-profit organization runs a vocational training center in a community in between the urban slums and businesses near Wazirpur Industrial Area in Delhi, India. The center trains youth on spoken English and personality development. It's within easy walking distance from the community, the training is free, the teachers are well qualified and amicable, and students are guaranteed certification and employment after they finish the courses. Further, the spoken English courses have been a hot favorite among the students.

However, despite the center's outreach initiatives, there aren't many walk-ins for the program, and most of the students who join drop out before completing the courses.

Identifying the real problem

To identify the problem, the GSIF team leveraged several design thinking techniques. These included:

Surveys and interviews: These were conducted among various stakeholders including current students, dropouts, members of the community, and mobilizers/facilitators to capture and collate the reasons for joining and dropping out, gauge awareness of the organization and this program, and understand mobilization challenges.

Feedback: Here, a mixed group of all stakeholders sat together in a room and posted on the walls anonymous sticky notes on what they thought was working well, what could be better, and what was not working well with the program.

After the session, the GSIF team members collated and analyzed the feedback.

Observations: And here, the GSIF team members observed actual training sessions, the actions and activities of walk-ins and mobilizers, and so on.

After a comprehensive analysis of all the input and information they gathered from the three above steps, the GSIF team identified several key problems:

- Lack of a structured approach to community mobilization: the mobilizers followed their own individual skills and approaches without a well-planned scientific process and outcome tracking capability

- Low brand/program awareness, recall, and visibility: limited people were aware of the not-for-profit organization's existence, services, and achievements

- Waning trainee interest in the initial weeks, leading to early dropouts: the dropout rate was highest in the initial two weeks, and the dropouts mentioned loss of interest as the key reason

- A flaw in the training center's overall process design: the center mandates that students attend classes six days a week, including Saturday. But the nearby cloth businesses hire youth on a part-time basis to meet their additional demand. And most often, the timing of the spoken English and personality development courses clashed with the factories' peak work time. So, the students ended up dropping out of the courses because they needed to work to make their families' ends meet

Key takeaway for all social sector organizations

The vocational training center was designed to train youth in spoken English and personality development and then guarantee them employment, and it succeeded very well at doing just that. However, it failed to consider the social and economic needs of the people living in the community. This is a common mistake in many commercial and social sector initiatives. They often falter or fail because they're not based on the needs of the customer or end beneficiaries.

Solutioning

To develop the solution, the GSIF team plus internal and external stakeholders, including students, alumni, mobilizers, communications, program management, and so on, used several design thinking tools.
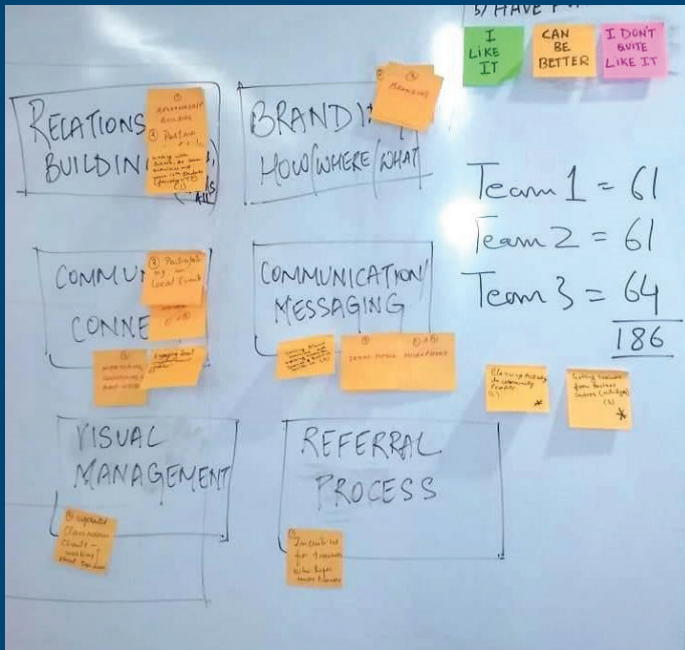
Ideation

This tool helped generate ideas from the group for the problem areas identified around some commonly acceptable enablers. Ideation is a time-bound activity, conducted in a meeting room, which gives everyone the opportunity to anonymously post any random idea to solve the issue that comes to their mind. Because ideation works better with lower numbers of participants, the external and internal stakeholders were separated into three teams.

Enablers	Community mobilization	Loss of interest	Visibility
People	Ideas	Ideas	Ideas
Process	Ideas	Ideas	Ideas
Technology	Ideas	Ideas	Ideas
Logistics	Ideas	Ideas	Ideas
Environment	Ideas	Ideas	Ideas
Partnerships	Ideas	Ideas	Ideas
Others	Ideas	Ideas	Ideas

Prioritization

Here, the three smaller teams plotted the best ideas across categories - including people, process, technology, environment, logistics, and partnerships - on an impact-difficulty matrix, without thinking about their feasibility. The center's founder then prioritized them further based on business impact and difficulty of implementation.

Ideation and prioritization

Concept designs

Finally, the internal and external stakeholders were separated into six teams, each of which was assigned one of the top six prioritized ideas:

- **Relationship building within the community**: a well-planned scientific approach to engage with various sections of the community

- **Branding**: strategies to uplift the brand image and spread it to the masses in the target communities

- **Visual management**: identify opportunities for visual management in the program delivery and impact presentation

- **Referral process**: design a referral process wherein existing and previous students can refer new students, followed by a return benefit

- **Communication messaging**: design a communication strategy for various audiences including prospective students, donors, social media, and internal teams

- **Community Connect**: plan to connect and reconnect with the community, spread awareness about the not-for-profit's services and impact, develop social messaging, and conduct community research to identify new areas of engagement

Each of the teams prepared concept posters explaining how they would shape the prioritized ideas for implementation. The steps they included were:

- Problem solved for what and for whom
- Solution approach
- Risks
- Pilot (how to test it)
- Metrics
- High-level implementation timelines

Each team presented its idea, and the rest voted to identify the most preferred design and areas of improvement. Then, the respective departments, in discussion with leadership, devised a future course of action.

Key takeaway for all social sector organizations

Even when nonprofit organizations go into the field for a needs assessment or to conduct any type of elementary research, they may take with them their preconceived notions of what the issues/problems are and what solutions should be implemented. This flawed approach is common in both the commercial and social sectors because people tend to rush to implement the solutions that have worked in the past in a similar context.

Design thinking goes beyond the assumptions that block effective solutions by incorporating consumer or end beneficiary insights. It encourages rapid prototyping and aims to address the needs of the end consumers or end beneficiaries and the infrastructure that enables the solution.

Conclusion

For years, businesses have embraced design thinking because it helps them innovate and bring their products and services to market faster.

Not-for-profits are now keen on using design thinking because it's adept at generating solutions that are rooted in the community, and data shows that a community is more likely to accept and own a solution if it's created from within the community. Design thinking as a technique lets high-impact solutions emerge from below rather than be instituted from the top.

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